

# Sexualising children?

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The rise of Comprehensive Sexuality Education

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## Executive Summary

In recent years, a new idea has emerged about how young people should be taught about sex and relationships. In what now seems like the distant past, sex education – to the degree it was taught at all – was a matter of biology. In more recent history, sex education has been expanded into a broader curriculum, involving considerations about the ethics of relationships, social responsibility, and lessons on whichever concerns dominate the press of the time, from sexually transmitted diseases to teenage pregnancy.

Today, a new paradigm has emerged, called Comprehensive Sexuality Education (henceforth, CSE). As the name suggests, it is both more thorough than previous ideas (comprehensive) and also wider reaching (it now focuses on the broader concept of ‘sexuality’ rather than just ‘sex’). CSE amounts to a powerful moral intervention into the lives of children around the world that happens as a routine part of the school day. Lessons aim to shape children’s attitudes and values in the most intimate sphere of their lives. The goal is to bring about social change.

Indeed, classes often focus little on the basic science of sexual reproduction and concentrate instead on broader themes such as sexuality and intimate relationships. Under the guise of CSE, a range of sexual behaviours are promoted and encouraged – even to toddlers. This underscores the fact that the aim of CSE is to change children’s attitudes and behaviours and, in this way, implement broader social change. As such, the global imposition of CSE unwittingly involves children in an explicitly political project.

CSE is promoted by supranational institutions such as UNESCO,<sup>1</sup> the World Health Organisation (WHO),<sup>2</sup> and the European Parliament.<sup>3</sup>

It is taught in countries around the world as part of the formal school curriculum. As such, it is a powerful intervention into children's lives. Proponents of CSE argue it is an effective means of reducing the risks associated with sexual activity and helps cultivate positive attitudes towards sex, sexuality, relationships, gender equality and gender identity. However, as this report sets out, there are many reasons to be concerned about the spread of CSE.

At the core of the argument against CSE is the fact that its proponents have become obsessed with promoting the idea that children are sexual beings and that their sexual pleasure is paramount. This view is not confined to fringe academic theories, but takes centre stage in the policies and advocacy work of major international NGOs. The inevitable result is that the CSE curriculum involves attempts to sexualise children in a way that the majority of parents in European countries would find objectionable. In fact, many parents would find this sexualisation of young people more dangerous than the supposed risks that CSE seeks to 'protect' young people from.

An elite group of unappointed sexuality 'experts' assume responsibility for inculcating children's attitudes towards sex and relationships and claim the moral authority to dictate how people should think, feel and act in the most intimate areas of their lives. Through this, CSE challenges national sovereignty and, by promoting children's rights, undermines the rights of parents.

This report is in three parts. The first part explores what children are taught under the remit of CSE. Part two considers why CSE has become the vehicle for the promotion of a global political project. Finally, part three presents the case against CSE.



## 1 What is Comprehensive Sexuality Education?

Comprehensive Sexuality Education is a global project that has been over three decades in development. UNESCO, along with WHO and other UN agencies, sets out standards for the delivery of CSE that national governments are expected to meet. Within the context of the European Union, primary responsibility for education policies lies with member states. Nonetheless, the EU and its institutions offer guidance in particular areas, including CSE. In doing so, they draw heavily upon work by UNESCO and WHO. This leads to similar definitions and guides to best practice replicated by the European Parliament,<sup>4</sup> the European Commission,<sup>5</sup> the European Union<sup>6</sup> and the Council of Europe.<sup>7</sup> UNESCO defines CSE as:

*a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to: realize their health, well-being and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and, understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives.<sup>8</sup>*

The significance attached to this definition by other international organizations and national governments means it is worth considering in some detail.

## WHAT IS COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION?

- The initial emphasis on a ‘curriculum-based process’ points to the role of schools and teachers in delivering CSE: this is a compulsory element of the curriculum and not something informal that might be delivered elsewhere (for example, by parents, churches or youth clubs)
- Listing the ‘cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality’ differentiates CSE from traditional academic subjects. Pupils are expected to be fully engaged as ‘active learners’, not passive recipients of facts
- The focus on gaining ‘skills, attitudes and values’. Clearly, the focus on ‘skills’ reflects the idea that CSE might have a practical impact. The focus on ‘attitudes and values’ raises questions about what are ‘correct’ values and who gets to decide
- Slippage between ‘children’ and ‘young people’ often passes without comment but, when it comes to sex, many nations have strict age-of-consent laws that delineate between adults and minors. In this context, the ambiguity around the phrase ‘young person’ is unhelpful
- Learning goals related to ‘well-being’ and ‘dignity’ are highly subjective. Whereas teachers can reasonably assess the extent to which pupils have mastered algebra, notions of well-being and dignity vary with each individual
- The emphasis on ‘respectful social and sexual relations’ and ‘the well-being of others’ hint that what is being promoted is less a personal sense of well-being and more conformity with a pre-determined ethical code
- The final reference to ‘rights’ moves us from education to politics

In sum, a definition of CSE that has been taken up by a powerful network of global organizations, and imposed upon nations, schools and children, exploits education to promote a highly politicized and contested approach to altering children's personal attitudes and values.

In 2020, the Council of Europe's commissioner for human rights called for CSE to be 'provided for by law, be mandatory and mainstreamed across the education system as of the early school years'.<sup>9</sup> A paper for the European Commission in 2020 notes that the European Parliament had recently 'reiterated the expectation that all member states adhere to WHO's *Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe*, follow good practice outlined in the UNESCO's *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education* and consider their progress towards the relevant Sustainable Development Goals when developing and delivering sexuality education'.<sup>10</sup>

European nations are expected to comply not just with UN directives but also with EU-wide guidance. CSE is considered in relation to public health rather than schooling and, in this way, the EU gains considerable (if indirect) influence on national sexuality-education programmes, notably with policies regarding sexual and reproductive health and HIV/AIDS prevention.<sup>11</sup> In addition, Article 11 of the Council of Europe's European Social Charter obliges nations to provide 'advisory and educational facilities for the promotion of health and the encouragement of individual responsibility in matters of health'.<sup>12</sup> Sexuality education for young people is considered a key way of meeting this obligation. Not providing CSE is assumed to be a violation of the European Social Charter.<sup>13</sup> The EU and its institutions fund research and monitoring systems on sexuality education as well as projects that share best practice among member states. In addition, the EU monitors opposition to sexuality education, and politically and financially supports organizations that challenge opposition and advocate for and implement sexuality education.<sup>14</sup>

## 2 The flawed rationale for Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Arguments for CSE are grounded within a human-rights framework, specifically the ‘rights of the child’. Numerous international organizations have declared that children have a right to CSE, including ‘the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and, at European level, the European Social Charter and the [...] Lanzarote and Istanbul Conventions’.<sup>15</sup> UNESCO suggests that CSE ‘builds on and promotes universal human rights for all, including children and young people’.<sup>16</sup>

CSE is promoted as a means for nations to meet children’s rights to health and education. In addition, UNESCO notes that CSE plays a role in making young people aware that they have rights while also making clear that they must ‘respect the rights of others, and advocate for those whose rights are violated’.<sup>17</sup> This emphasis is echoed by the Council of Europe, which notes:

*access to comprehensive sexuality education is a human right and that it is for the benefit of all. Sexuality education is about knowing one’s rights and respecting other people’s rights.*<sup>18</sup>

This international consensus shuts down questions about what it actually means to have a ‘right’ to CSE. CSE is not a ‘natural right’; it is neither universal nor inalienable. It is not something children can enact themselves,

but a service provided to them, by schools, at the behest of national governments and supranational organisations. As attendance is often mandatory, as part of compulsory education, participating in CSE is a demand made on children rather than a freedom they enjoy.

CSE not only redefines the concept of ‘rights’ but in the process of notionally giving rights to children, it takes rights away from adults – most notably, their parents. The right to a private family life, free from outside interference, would once have encompassed the rights of parents to raise their children according to their personal moral codes. CSE guidance assumes that it is not families but children who have a right to privacy and confidentiality. A child may divulge to a CSE teacher that they have engaged in sexual practices, or that they are experiencing confusion about their gender identity, with a reasonable assumption that such information will not be disclosed to their parents.

CSE is promoted not just as a right in itself, but as a way of teaching children to respect the rights of others. But often, when rights compete, a demand to respect the rights of others is a demand on individuals to suppress their own right to privacy, free speech or freedom of conscience. For example, respecting the right of a transgender person to express their gender identity could mean teaching children that it is wrong to assert a right to single-sex spaces.

Under a rights framework, moral questions relating to sexuality are redefined as legal questions. What matters is not what is morally right or wrong, but what is legal or illegal. The dominant framing is one of consent: children are taught that ‘anything goes’ so long as people engage in consensual sexual activity. Developing an awareness of ‘sexuality’ then logically becomes about preparing children to engage in a range of consensual acts. Much of this ‘awareness’ becomes about expanding the imagination

of the young person – thus CSE often involves ‘introducing’ children to ‘novel’ sexual activities, such as masturbation or anal sex. Thus follows the imperative to be ‘sex positive’, which means embracing all consensual sexual acts.

The rationale for CSE rests on a number of assertions: about ‘evidence’ and the judgement of *science*; about the *risks* young people face; about *political change*; and about *social change*. We turn to each of these briefly in turn.

## 2.1 ‘The Science’

The subtitle of UNESCO’s *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education* is ‘An evidence-informed approach’. This focus on ‘evidence’ along with ‘technical guidance’ suggests CSE is ‘scientific’ with morally neutral learning outcomes that stand above individual opinion or cultural context. By the same token, it is argued that scientific evidence ‘proves’ the effectiveness of CSE in relation to a number of objective outcomes:

*A review of 64 studies involving over 87,000 young people confirmed that school-based comprehensive sexuality education has a positive impact, resulting in: increased and more effective use of contraception, including condom use during last sex; reduced high-risk sexual behaviour; and less frequent condomless sex in the past three months.*<sup>19</sup>

Similar claims are frequently repeated. For example, one paper argues that ‘the teenage birth rate tends to be very low in countries where national, comprehensive sexuality-education programmes are in place’.<sup>20</sup> Yet, far from being ‘scientific’, such evidence is primarily based on self-reported outcomes. It may be the case that CSE teaches children the ‘correct’ responses to surveys. As the European Commission later confirms:

*there were fewer RCTs [randomized controlled trials] or reviews that have directly linked the delivery of sexuality education to improvements in biological outcomes (such as teenage pregnancies, lower sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or human immunodeficiency viruses (HIV) rates).<sup>21</sup>*

In other words, even the European Commission has to accept that the evidence for the supposed necessity of sexuality education is patchy at best.

In truth, the authors of an overview on CSE admit that there are significant weaknesses in the evidence for CSE. Some long-term outcomes are hard to study, as it is difficult to put any effects solely down to CSE. Other ‘impact indicators’ – such as ‘A more tolerant social climate that is respectful towards sexuality, various lifestyles, attitudes and values’ or ‘More young people experience sexuality in a pleasurable manner’ – are simply insufficiently represented in the research literature.<sup>22</sup> The goal is to change attitudes and behaviour and, despite references to ‘science’, this imperative trumps any concern for the factual efficacy of CSE.

## **2.2 Risk**

Proponents argue CSE is needed to counteract the multiple risks children face if left to explore their sexuality without professional guidance. UNESCO claims that CSE:

*plays a central role in the preparation of young people for a safe, productive, fulfilling life in a world where HIV and AIDS, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unintended pregnancies, gender-based violence (GBV) and gender inequality still pose serious risks to their well-being.<sup>23</sup>*

Such statements assert the risks assumed to threaten children who do not partake in CSE. Health risks, such as HIV/AIDs or other sexually transmitted

infections, as well as ‘unintended pregnancy’, are most frequently cited. By linking CSE to increased use of condoms and lower rates of STIs, the absence of CSE comes to be understood as a risk to children, irrespective of any sexual behaviours they may be engaged in. The European Parliament notes that:

*Experts have argued in numerous studies and reports that flawed or insufficient sexuality education leads to an increase of teenage pregnancy rate and a higher amount of people suffering from AIDS and STIs. Sexuality education of young people must therefore be regarded as an appropriate means to prevent these negative effects.*<sup>24</sup>

Of course, the invocation of ‘the experts’ is designed to lend credibility to what is simply an assertion, repeated endlessly in research papers that are themselves often directly funded by the advocates of CSE. Conveniently, the absence of a sufficiently robust sexuality education is blamed for social problems. This seems to suggest that STIs are caused by bad education, not unprotected sex.

CSE is also linked to protecting children from sexual violence. The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) argues:

*Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.*<sup>25</sup>

Healthy relationships are defined as ‘pleasurable’ and ‘safe’ in contrast to ‘coercion, discrimination and violence’. We will return later to the new emphasis on ‘pleasure’.

The phrase ‘child abuse’ is rarely used. This seems like a subtle change, but it has a profound impact. The idea of child abuse is that all sexual activity



between adults and children is exploitative and abusive. Instead of this idea, we have a focus on ‘coercion’ or ‘violence’. This suggests it is some *behaviours* (violent ones), rather than some *relationships* in themselves (like sexual ones between adults and children), that are wrong.

Most startlingly, CSE is presented as a tool that not only dissuades perpetrators, but also ensures young people do not become victims of abuse. The latter point implies that young people need to learn skills and behaviours to avoid abuse. This in effect puts the responsibility for avoiding abuse onto young people, rather than leaving responsibility with the perpetrator. The important point that it is the responsibility of adults to protect children, not children to protect themselves, is often overlooked in the discussion of CSE and risk prevention.

CSE is assumed to protect children from emotional as well as physical risks. UNESCO notes that:

*CSE, by definition, promotes healthy social and emotional development, and therefore, as education systems recognize their role in promoting social and emotional learning (SEL), there is increasing interest in how CSE is already contributing to the development of social and emotional skills.*<sup>26</sup>

This ignores the role played by family, community and religion in establishing moral norms around relationships. Instead, it is assumed that this can only be achieved through CSE.<sup>27</sup>

In order to justify a continued focus on CSE, new risks confronting children must be found. There are concerns about pornography and social media. ‘Sexting’ is discussed as ‘new high-risk behaviour among youth’ for which the only solution is ‘increased and improved education about the various serious risks associated with the practice’.<sup>28</sup>

Another study insists that:

*confusing information and conflicting messages about relationships and sex can make the transition from childhood to adulthood difficult if young people are not properly supported and prepared with accurate scientific knowledge.*<sup>29</sup>

Ultimately, it is growing up and negotiating adulthood without professional help from outside agencies that proponents of CSE present as the real risk. Once this need for professional support with growing up is accepted, CSE is free to colonize every aspect of the interior life of the child, shaping not just personal behaviour, but individual beliefs and emotional responses, too.

One noticeable thing about the strategies for avoiding risk advocated by proponents of CSE is that they look precisely like the kinds of behaviours that would seem genuinely risky to the average parent. For example, the IPPF is entirely typical when it promotes sexual pleasure as a key goal of sexuality education:

*[A]ll conversations around pleasure must emphasise the diversity forms of pleasure can take. Programmes which do this can strengthen the focus on communication and consent, through recognition that giving and receiving pleasure requires sexual partners to reject assumptions, in favour of asking questions and verbalising both desires and boundaries.*<sup>30</sup>

This suggests that the role of CSE is to teach children diverse forms of sexual pleasure and encourage them to reject assumptions about what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Children are taught to expand their sexual horizons, to ‘reject assumptions’ and focus on ‘giving and receiving pleasure’ before being encouraged to ‘verbalise’ boundaries. Children are yet again told that the only limit is consent – and even consent requires they

first have an open mind to saying yes. Although dressed up in the language of ‘health’ and preventing risk, giving children responsibility for their sexual experiences and encouraging a wider range of behaviours arguably leaves children more vulnerable than if they had not been exposed to CSE.

### **2.3 Political justifications**

Although the promotion of CSE employs the language of ‘science’, ‘evidence’ and ‘risk-prevention’, the primary arguments for its adoption are political. As noted above, a key measure of the perceived effectiveness of CSE is shifting attitudes towards gender equality. In 2020, the Council of Europe made clear that CSE should:

*contribute to conveying, from the early stages of education, strong messages in favour of equality between women and men, promoting non-stereotyped gender roles, educating about mutual respect, consent to sexual relations, non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships and respect for personal integrity, as requested by the Istanbul Convention.*<sup>31</sup>

The same year, the European Commission found that ‘delivering sexuality education programmes to children and young people at school can have a positive effect on larger societal issues, such as gender equality, human rights, and the well-being and safety of children and young people’.<sup>32</sup> In 2022, a report published by the European Parliament noted ‘increasing evidence on the positive effect of sexuality education on gender-equitable attitudes, respect for sexual diversity and gender-equitable relationships’.<sup>33</sup>

These statements make clear that the relatively uncontroversial idea of equality between the sexes has morphed into a far more contested notion of gender equality. This assumes, in line with gender theory, that biological

sex is less significant than a person's interior sense of themselves or how they choose to identify. This threatens single-sex spaces, sports, toilets and accommodation.

CSE is tasked with challenging discrimination. UNESCO notes that, through CSE, children learn, 'to understand injustice based on gender. They learn to uphold the universal values of equality, love and kindness.'<sup>34</sup> Kindness is often interpreted as a demand not to pass judgement. The Council of Europe human-rights commissioner's comment is clear that, 'sexuality education should not include value judgements or perpetuate prejudices and stereotypes'.<sup>35</sup> The demand not to judge is, ironically, in itself a value judgement. It condemns those who live according to a religious or moral code as bigoted. The commissioner continues by warning that 'non-stigmatising information on sexual orientation and gender identity' is necessary because it 'can help save lives'.

*It can contribute to combating homophobia and transphobia, at school and beyond, and to creating a safer and more inclusive learning environment for all.*<sup>36</sup>

The clear implication is that those who do not accept same-sex relationships, or who question whether a man can turn into a woman simply on the basis of feelings, have blood on their hands. When the consequences of illiberalism are posed so starkly, CSE must respond by promoting social change, including 'supporting individuals to become active bystanders' in order to challenge 'social injustices such as sexual violence, transphobia and racism'.<sup>37</sup>

In this case, education has become very explicitly about creating a new generation of political advocates who, given the threat to peoples 'lives', must employ any and all strategies to challenge 'injustices'.

## 2.4 Social change

The European Commission notes:

*Beyond health outcomes and knowledge, there is also emerging evidence that sexuality education programmes can contribute to broader societal changes.*<sup>38</sup>

Encouraging the questioning of traditional sources of authority and loyalties (to the family, community, nation and religion) helps justify the influence of supranational institutions. UNESCO claims: ‘Raising awareness about CSE and involving all stakeholders is essential to educate young populations on issues that foster inclusive societies.’<sup>39</sup> The language of ‘stakeholders’, ‘populations’ and ‘societies’ undermines the notion of citizenship.

For IPPF, challenging existing hierarchies goes beyond social and economic inequalities to consider equality of sexual pleasure. It argues that:

*social inequalities contribute to a sexual system that is geared towards the pleasure of people who enjoy power based on their gender, race, socio-economic status, nationality or other factors.*

According to this perspective, CSE contributes towards achieving both social and sexual justice.

*CSE can also provide an important forum for building solidarity between young people with varying degrees of access to privilege and sexual rights. It can also strengthen active citizenship skills for working towards a sexual culture that is more just and equal.*<sup>40</sup>

The language of political activism is being appropriated to redefine solidarity away from class-based concerns and onto ‘sexual culture’. Rather than taking to the picket lines, young people instructed in CSE are trained to become policemen of the bedroom.

## 3 Against Comprehensive Sexuality Education

### 3.1 CSE sexualises childhood

Defenders of CSE claim there is a consensus that providing sexuality education does not lead to an increase in sexual activity among young people. However, the principles on which CSE is based assume children are sexual beings with sexual rights, including, first and foremost, the right to sexual pleasure. Although CSE may not directly correlate with an increase in sexual activity, it sexualises childhood in a way many consider not just morally inappropriate but a potential threat to children's safety.

According to WHO, 'All people are born as sexual beings'.<sup>41</sup> This justifies calls for CSE to begin in early childhood. WHO argues that:

*From birth, babies learn the value and pleasure of bodily contact, warmth and intimacy ... From birth, parents in particular send messages to their children that relate to the human body and intimacy.*

*In other words, they are engaging in sexuality education.*<sup>42</sup>

It hardly needs emphasising how unusual this framing is. Very few parents see themselves as 'engaging in sexuality education' when they care for babies, and most would be suspicious of those who do. The WHO has set out to interpret all human caring behaviour through a sexual lens,

bringing a highly sexualised framework into family life. Babies are not ‘sexual beings’. The WHO is sexualising childhood.

UNESCO adopts a similar line. It claims:

*Young people are sexual beings. All young people should be able to explore, experience and express their sexualities in healthy, positive, pleasurable and safe ways. This can only happen when young people’s sexual rights are understood, recognized and guaranteed.*<sup>43</sup>

The phrase ‘young people’ is, by design, slippery. It blurs the boundaries between childhood and adulthood in a way that suggests that children and adults are equally sexually mature and able to exercise ‘sexual rights’.

Astonishingly, UNESCO appears to claim that children are somehow *more* sexual than adults:

*The sexuality of children is much broader than that of the average adult. It can be regarded as one aspect of the development of sensuality, which is part of psychological, social and biological development.*<sup>44</sup>

Children are presented as being both inherently sexual beings and in the process of development. These two seemingly contradictory claims justify the perceived need for CSE.

Once it is established that children are inherently sexual beings, it is argued that they have sexual rights and that it is wrong to deny children opportunities for sexual pleasure. By this logic, instruction in sexual pleasure is perceived not as a means of inappropriately sexualising childhood but of allowing children to fulfil their human rights.

IPPF demonstrates the logic of this argument. It claims: ‘Young people’s rights are often neglected, ignored or misunderstood; and young people are especially vulnerable to sexual-rights violations.’ It then highlights ‘a framework for understanding how human rights apply to young people’s

sexuality’ and offers ‘practical ideas about how to translate sexual rights into actions for and by young people’.<sup>45</sup> We rapidly move from children’s rights to sexual rights and the need for children to be helped to ‘translate sexual rights into actions’. Those in favour of highly sexualised CSE pose as the defenders of children while those who question the appropriateness of, say, teaching children under the age of 10 about masturbation, are cast as a threat.

### **3.2 CSE is not ‘age appropriate’**

As a defence against charges of inappropriate sexualisation, proponents of CSE argue lessons must be age- and developmentally-appropriate. However, ‘age’ and ‘development’ are not the same thing. Within a random group of 12-year-olds, for example, some may be well into puberty while others have yet to begin the physical transition to adulthood. Some may be curious about sex and relationships while others are not. Teachers must be guided by age *or* development.

According to the WHO’s *Standards for Sexuality Education*, the task is to:

*indicate what children and young people at different ages should know and understand, what situations or challenges they should be able to handle at those ages, and which values and attitudes they need to develop; all of this so that they can develop in a satisfactory, positive and healthy manner as regards their sexuality.*<sup>46</sup>

Here, we see the focus is on age, rather than development. But this soon leads to moral judgements about ‘what situations or challenges’ children ‘*should* be able to handle’ (my emphasis) at any given age and what values and attitudes they should hold. WHO goes on to claim that topics should, ideally, be ‘introduced before the child reaches the corresponding



stage of development, so as to prepare him/her for the changes which are about to take place'.<sup>47</sup> In this way, CSE is not responding to the concerns of the child, but pre-empting them.

The need for CSE to instruct children in advance of their development leads to calls for lessons to start at ever-younger ages. WHO argues CSE should start before children reach the age of four in order to achieve the 'normalization of the topic of sexuality'; specifically, to show children 'that issues related to sexuality are positive and enjoyable'.<sup>48</sup> It sets out a 'matrix' indicating what children of each age should know. It begins 'before the age of four' and children should learn about 'enjoyment and pleasure when touching one's own body' including 'early childhood masturbation'.<sup>49</sup>

In this way, CSE employs the language of sexual rights and 'age appropriateness' to introduce children to sexual practices long before it may occur to them to think about these things by themselves.

### **3.3 CSE promotes a warped idea of 'sex positivity'**

A key part of CSE instruction is the requirement that children are not simply taught facts about sex, but are encouraged to develop a 'positive' attitude towards sex and relationships. The Council of Europe is clear that CSE is 'about protecting one's health, and about adopting a positive attitude towards sexuality and relationships'.<sup>50</sup>

A sex-positive approach focuses on the pleasure and enjoyment to be gained from sex. It looks to build children's 'sexual confidence' through 'information, knowledge and skills'.<sup>51</sup> By being 'sex positive', schools and teachers end up promoting sexual activity to children. The role of the teacher is to lead children to the fulfilment of these rights by shaping their attitudes in a way that makes them approach sex 'positively' and with the confidence to consent to sexual experiences. In this way, CSE is rarely responding

to children's needs but pre-empting children's sexual development and sexualizing childhood. Children are encouraged to consent to 'pleasurable' sexual experiences, but are not taught how or why they might say no to sex.

### **3.4 CSE undermines the family**

In seeking to shape children's attitudes and values, and in purporting to know what is appropriate for children at any given age, CSE undermines families – and the role of parents in particular. Parental involvement is often presented as an obstacle to the delivery of CSE and, as such, a threat to children's capacity to fulfil their sexual rights. UNESCO notes 'the challenges teachers face in providing sexuality education due to concerns regarding parent and community-member views, as well as personal discomfort'.<sup>52</sup> This reveals that CSE promotes values that are antithetical to those of the home. Yet rather than this being a problem, it is parents who raise questions about CSE that are deemed problematic.

Organizations offer schools advice on how best to overcome parental opposition. One book notes that 'taking the time to listen to the concerns and values of the parents proved effective and necessary in furthering the objective of reaching the children'.<sup>53</sup> There is no suggestion here that the concerns of parents will be taken seriously or acted upon, especially if that means abandoning CSE; rather, it is suggested that 'listening' to parents acts as a form of appeasement and quells opposition.

A further suggestion by the authors is that children can play a useful role in re-educating their parents:

*We encouraged [the children] and provided the resources to reach out to their parents. This reverse teaching strategy helped because young people from the community were perceived to be the least threatening segment of the population in this highly structured, hierarchical community.*<sup>54</sup>

This makes explicit the role of CSE in imposing a new and contested values-framework upon society. It exploits the parent-child relationship in a bid to overturn cultural norms.

What is missing from policy discussion of the role of families in relation to CSE is an indication that parents love their children and have their best interests at heart. Parents almost always know their children and their developmental needs at any given point in time better than teachers or health professionals. For all these reasons, parents are most able to keep their children safe. CSE employs the language of children's rights but, in usurping the authority of parents, it makes children more, not less, vulnerable.

### **3.5 CSE undermines national sovereignty**

Although nations are sovereign when it comes to determining education policy, many international treaties compel the delivery of CSE in schools. When nation states fail to comply, supranational organizations see national sovereignty as a barrier to the promotion of CSE.

In Europe, the European Parliament and the Council of Europe expect member states to conform with obligations set out in international standards and agreements (as set out in Part One) and adopt CSE as part of national curricula. Countries such as Hungary and Poland that have failed to comply are placed under considerable political and financial pressure. In December 2022, the European Commission announced it would withhold €22 billion of EU cohesion funds from Hungary until it altered laws prohibiting the promotion of homosexuality and transgender identities in schools.<sup>55</sup>

Getting nations to enshrine CSE provision in law is a key goal of global NGOs. At the same time, they condemn national laws that run counter to

the agenda they wish to promote. The European Parliament, for example, criticises member states for introducing legislation that stands in the way of CSE provision. In 2019, the Parliament condemned Poland's proposal to penalise 'public approval or encouragement of sexual activity of minors', arguing that it would 'lead to the effective criminalisation of sexuality education'.<sup>56</sup>

### **3.6 CSE challenges local cultural norms**

In addition to challenging national laws, CSE challenges local cultural norms. UNESCO acknowledges that CSE, 'addresses sexual and reproductive health issues, including ... those that may be challenging in some social and cultural contexts'.<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless, it goes on to argue that NGOs and UN agencies have a crucial role to play in delivering sexuality education because they can 'advocate for comprehensive approaches, develop strategies to build support, and hold governments accountable for their commitments'.<sup>58</sup> In other words, local cultural norms, where recognised, are to be negotiated and overcome, and not backed by national governments.

International NGOs delivering CSE in the global south are similarly aware of the threat their work poses to the traditional beliefs and attitudes of families. One activist notes hearing local people say:

*'We don't like these sorts of conversations to open up in our community.' This is not an uncommon reaction from concerned parents and something we need to address as change agents.*<sup>59</sup>

Defining those delivering CSE as 'change agents' makes clear the perception that it is the community's reaction that needs to be addressed, not the presence of Western sexuality educators.

Proponents of CSE seek to bypass national sovereignty and local cultural norms in order to reach teachers, and children, directly. They use monitoring,

political pressure, and financial incentives and penalties to ensure this happens. As such, CSE, as the inculcation of Western-derived hyper-liberal values, is imposed upon children around the world in a concerted endeavour to alter social attitudes. Homogenized in both form and content, CSE is a form of modern-day cultural imperialism.

### **3.7 CSE undermines education**

CSE is formally linked to schooling through the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were agreed by national governments in 2015 and are designed to guide development priorities globally until 2030. UNESCO claims: 'Comprehensive sexuality education is a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality.'<sup>60</sup> The 'education' part of CSE similarly normalizes lessons as part of regular schooling. Listing the 'cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality' suggests that this is an academically rigorous subject that delivers measurable knowledge and skills-based outcomes. The implication is that CSE has equal status with traditional academic subjects and that lesson content is similarly objective.

The message that 'Comprehensive sexuality education is an essential part of a good quality education that helps prepare young people for a fulfilling life in a changing world'<sup>61</sup> is repeated across many different policy documents. Yet far from being grounded in objective subject knowledge, CSE is a fundamentally political project with no associated body of knowledge. By involving schools in the delivery of CSE, teachers are recruited into a political project designed to change future social norms by reshaping the values and attitudes of children in the present.

The assumption that CSE requires 'an active teaching and learning approach centred on students' implies teachers need specialised training

in order to communicate with children about topics which are grounded in subjective human experiences. The European Parliament makes this point clear: ‘training the teachers to deliver sexuality education is vital, especially because a highly sensitive topic such as sexuality might cause discomfort and embarrassment to teachers having insufficient expertise, knowledge and awareness’.<sup>62</sup> Yet the very idea that sexuality and relationships require expertise and knowledge would be alien to previous generations.

CSE represents a misuse of the school curriculum for political ends. It does not just take time away from teaching children academic subjects, it fundamentally alters the role of the teacher and the purpose of schools. When separated from a body of knowledge and an intellectual purpose, teaching becomes an ideological project. This misuse of education breaks the social contract between child and teacher, school and parents. CSE transforms schooling into an anti-democratic political exercise designed to meet the demands of international organizations.

## 4 Conclusions

CSE is a carefully coordinated, well-funded, highly political project that extends across the globe. Driven by a small number of powerful international NGOs, it has successfully influenced national educational policies and practice within individual schools. In the process, it sexualises children and undermines the family, national sovereignty and education.

Proponents of CSE assume that it is the right of international organizations, via national educational policies, schools and teachers, to shape children's attitudes to sex and relationships. Children are taught to accept as fact highly contested ideas about gender identity. They are expected to reject moral frameworks that derive from religious or cultural norms in favour of views derived from queer theory and gender ideology, that children are sexual beings with a right to sexual pleasure. They are taught to be open-minded and tolerant to different sexual identities and relationships, but this permissiveness is intolerant of moral limits on sexual behaviour.

Although CSE takes the form of 'sex education', it is less concerned with teaching objective facts about biology and sexual reproduction than it is concerned with bringing about social change through altering the private thoughts and intimate relationships of the next generation.

CSE presents children as sexual beings while ignoring, or criticising, national legislation on age of consent. Children are 'empowered' to consent to sexual activity while lessons undermine reasons they may wish to avoid participation. Changes in values, attitudes and behaviour are reinforced

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through classroom practice that subjects the interior realm of the child to public scrutiny. When combined with undermining the family, there are good arguments to suggest CSE sexualises children and leaves them at greater risk of exploitation.

The global reach of CSE, into societies that have very different cultures and traditions, indicates that this is a social-engineering project designed to bring hyper-liberal values to societies that have not yet adopted such an approach. International NGOs deliver CSE without any form of public accountability. In this way, CSE is a form of moral imperialism that seeks to bypass democracy in order to change social attitudes and, in the process, colonise the minds of the next generation. For all these reasons, the institutions of the European Union must stop promoting CSE in schools.



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## **About MCC Brussels**

At a time of unprecedented political polarisation, MCC Brussels is committed to providing a home for genuine policy deliberation and an in-depth exploration of the issues of our time.

MCC Brussels is committed to asking the hard questions and working with people of goodwill from all persuasions to find solutions to our most pressing problems. An initiative of MCC (Mathias Corvinus Collegium), the leading Hungarian educational forum, MCC Brussels was founded in the autumn of 2022 to make a case for celebrating true diversity of thought, diversity of views, and the diversity of European cultures and their values.

In recent years, a new idea has emerged about how young people should be taught about sex and relationships.

Sex education has been expanded into a broader curriculum, involving considerations about the ethics of relationships, social responsibility, and lessons on whichever concerns dominate the press of the time, from sexually transmitted diseases to teenage pregnancy.

Today, a new paradigm has emerged, called Comprehensive Sexuality Education (henceforth, CSE). As the name suggests, it is both more thorough than previous ideas and also wider reaching. CSE amounts to a powerful moral intervention into the lives of children around the world that happens as a routine part of the school day. Lessons aim to shape children's attitudes and values in the most intimate sphere of their lives. The goal is to bring about social change.

Proponents of CSE have become obsessed with promoting the idea that children are sexual beings and that their sexual pleasure is paramount. This view is not confined to fringe academic theories, but takes centre stage in the policies and advocacy work of major international NGOs. The inevitable result is that the CSE curriculum involves attempts to sexualise children in a way that the majority of parents in European countries would find objectionable.

This report takes apart the CSE curriculum, and exposes its desire to sexualise the lives of young children.